

Crafting youth work training: synergising theory and practice in an Australian VET environment

Andrew Wojecki

Australian Institute of Social Relations, Relationships Australia (SA)

In the Australian vocational education and training (VET) context, attention is often given to what youth work training programs should consist of, resulting in less attention on how youth work education and training programs might be imagined, constructed and implemented. In this paper, a particular South Australian youth work training program is explored with the purpose of investigating the particular educational methodology employed and its impact in the structuring and delivery of a VET youth work education program. It emphasises that, in conceiving a competency-based youth work curriculum and its contribution toward the development of professional youth work identities, how the youth work educational program is delivered is just as important as what it should consist of.

Introduction

The role of reflection has emerged as an important practice for adult educators in enhancing the knowledge and skills required for fostering effective learning environments (Brookfield 2006). Self-study methodologies are emerging, further enabling adult educators to reflect and thicken their own knowledge about their educative practices (Dinkleman 2003) and personal epistemologies (Billett & Smith 2007). In this paper, I explore a youth work training program developed for youth workers living and working in regional and remote communities in South Australia. Rather than attempting to portray the experiences of the adult learners within this training program, I seek to explore my own learnings about teaching within a VET context which include my sense-making as a VET practitioner in Australia and in sharing my connections between theory and practice in fostering competency-based training programs within work environments. This paper illustrates how I design and tailor a competency-based training program to foster workplace learning and contribute toward the development of professional identities amongst a cohort of South Australian youth workers.

The educational methodologies and approaches of the youth work training program are influenced by theories of workplace learning (Rainbird, Fuller & Munro 2004). The key methodological elements shaping this training program are considered in order to demonstrate how this competency-based training program emphasises the learning occurring for the adult learners across multiple sites of youth work. In doing so, a contribution to youth work education is offered by transferring the focus and discussion from *'what'* youth work education should consist of, to *'how'* youth work education programs might be conceptualised and delivered. It is proposed that, when discussing professional youth work identities in an Australian context, *'how'* youth work education programs are implemented is just as important as *'what'* they should consist of, in contributing to building diverse and rigorous professional identities in youth work.

Sites of youth work as sites of learning

The development of this training program is heavily influenced by the literature on workplace learning (Billett 2002, 2004), organisational learning (Brown & Duguid 1991, Gherardi & Nicolini 2002) and adult education (Foley 2004). From these educational perspectives, three dimensions are considered: the working cultures of the participating workplaces, the type of youth work being conducted, and the context in which the youth work is occurring. This stance provides attention to how these workplace cultures either foster or stifle learning processes for youth workers, including a focus on the nature of the youth work practices involved (statutory youth work or non-statutory youth work, street-based or office bound, program facilitation or case management, etc.) and how youth workers guide their own learning and the learning of their peers (Billett 2003). Billett (1999) discusses, in framing the workplace as a site of learning, '[f]irstly, the kinds of activities that individuals engage in determine what they learn. Secondly, the kinds of guidance they access when engaged in that learning determines the quality of that learning' (p. 151). From this perspective of the workplace as a site of learning for youth workers, the training program is situated to emphasise the kinds of youth work in which participants are engaged as well as the work cultures surrounding their youth work practices.

Garrick (1999) demonstrates that there are competing discourses framing how learning is conceptualised within workplaces. He suggests that there are broader possibilities and metaphors for learning than the dominant, narrow interpretations of learning, such as the 'learning-as-product' model proposed by Hager (2004) or the 'learning as acquisition' metaphor described by Sfard (1998). In the context of youth work education, this raises challenging questions regarding the development of reflexive and emerging professional identities. With these competing views on learning, which is the more valued and appreciated: youth workers' learning *for* the workplace or youth workers' learning *in* the workplace?

When a site of youth work is conceptualised within theoretical perspectives of workplace learning, youth workers' learning may occur symmetrically through work. In fact, it might be argued that the work is the learning. As Billett (2002) notes:

if learning is seen as something privileged by practices within educational institutions, rather than as a consequence of participation in social practices more generally, such as those involved in the production of goods or services, this may inhibit understanding about learning generally and learning through work, in particular (p. 57).

With this consideration given to workplace learning and to particular work practices, including routine and non-routine activities and the nature of interactions between colleagues and clients in a site of youth work, the milieu of the youth work is given attention. This occurs rather than just dispensing generalized knowledge about youth work. The setting and environment of the youth work is as equally valuable and important as the knowledge and skills that the educational training providers are seeking to translate into the workplace. By privileging the contexts youth workers are embedded within, new ways of understanding the curriculum of the youth work education program may be enabled.

The traditional notion of curriculum is that it consists of planned 'subject-matter' responsible for shaping a particular time and space for learning that is primarily driven by the educator. In the workplace, Moore (2004) articulates that an alternative position emphasising a situated curriculum, or 'curriculum of experience', should be taken. Moore summarises that, 'thinking about curriculum as a feature of workplace learning means thinking about the way people involved in a particular situation construct a more or less shared conception of knowledge through which they organise their interactions and activities' (p. 331). It is an educative stance that values the lived contexts and experiences which shape how youth workers give meaning to their work, and acknowledges how these meanings structure their actions and intentions in sites of youth work.

This provides a platform to commence a formalised approach to the education, training and professional development of youth workers through further constructing and building upon youth workers' 'nested knowledge' (Lyons 1990).

Clustering youth workers: creating learning communities

The funding body for which I was working identified three geographical regions in South Australia in which to target potential youth workers for participating in this training program. In each identified region there are differing communities, with some up to several hours away from each other. Also, in each regional centre there are multiple youth service providers whose participation was desired. Out of the expressed interests of the funding body came several factors heavily influencing how an effective workforce development and training program might be constructed and implemented. These factors contributed to the development of learning clusters.

Learning clusters emphasise the innovation, inspiration and actions necessary for creating strong relational networks for knowledge sharing amongst youth workers in each region. Through learning clusters, youth workers come together to merge ideas and theories into actions. By participating in forms of action-based learning and experiential-based learning, youth workers engage in more cooperative and collaborative forms of learning and inquiry. This leads to an emphasis on the social and relational dimensions of learning and perception-making. Through collaborative endeavours emerges a sense of a professional identity connecting youth workers to a larger community of peers.

The need to bring participants from differing locations within each region grew out of the reality that individual workshops in each site of youth work could not be sustained. The fiscal resources were not

available. Establishing workshops in a single location within each region was more feasible.

More importantly, there are significant theoretical considerations in establishing learning clusters. Firstly, youth workers from differing communities and sites of youth work in each region bring varying biographies and dispositions to their youth work (Dominice 2000, Hodgkinson, Hodgkinson, Evans, Kersh, Fuller, Unwin & Senker 2004). This creates a diverse learning group, in effect, formally establishing a 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991, Brown and Duguid 1991) for peer learning to occur through social interaction, engagement and reflection on situated youth work practices. This view of learning is identified as 'legitimate peripheral learning' (Lave & Wenger 1991) where new or novice youth workers develop skills and knowledge through direct participation within a community of more experienced practitioners (a youth work team) and a site of work and learning (a youth centre). Through their participation and experience, youth workers develop skills, knowledge and a growing sense of professional belonging and vocational identity. The accumulative effect of this participation and socially situated learning leads to their movement from the periphery to a more centralised position within a community of youth work practitioners.

This situated view of learning is fundamentally different to mainstream understandings of learning. Rather than seeing learning consisting of an individual's acquisition of objective, de-contextualised knowledge disembodied from a context, this view understands learning to be anchored within particular settings. Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991, Brown & Duguid 1991) proposes learning to be a socially mediated activity, where knowledge is constructed within the work practices and workplace contexts that particular communities of youth work practitioners are located within.

Designing the training program: methodological elements

From these three regional learning clusters, an educational methodology evolved giving shape to the training program. Although the curriculum content of the training program – the ‘*what*’ – is equally important to the discussion of pedagogies or the specific principles that adult educators utilise in shaping learning relationships – the ‘*how*’ – due to space constraints this aspect of the training program is not explored further here. Rather, a focus is placed on the methodological elements structured in addressing youth worker training, with special attention to learning within the workplace. The first element of this training program involves the incorporation of structured workshops. The second element consists of work-based learning projects. The third element incorporates integrated community events. And the fourth element involves individual assessment interviews. None of these elements stands alone; they build upon each other. There is no necessary sequential order between these methodological elements; however, it is the whole, integral nature of these four elements that contributes to securing the successful completion of youth workers’ participation within this competency-based training program.

Structured workshops

Structured workshops are developed to address the core and elective competencies comprising the youth work qualifications in which participants are enrolled. In delivering a youth work curriculum that covers the necessary theoretical dimensions and competencies these youth work qualifications require, the workshops are designed to function as the main thread around which other methodological elements are woven. However, the workshops are also designed to foster an emergent and negotiated curriculum (Brew & Barrie 1999), to develop the ‘discursive resources’ (Potter 1998) enabling further participation within the training program and the workplace, and to strengthen dimensions of ‘relational trust’ (Bryk & Schneider 2003) amongst youth workers within each region.

A significant component in structuring the workshops is the role of consultation with participants. In order to identify key areas of skills development, and ensure the relevance of the training program, youth workers are actively involved in shaping the training program. Consequently, full consideration is given to the workplace and community contexts within which these youth workers are situated. While keeping negotiation within a well defined structure shaped by the required competency frameworks, this co-construction of the youth work curriculum creates greater involvement, motivational investment and a sense of ownership in the learning for participants.

From these workshops, participants enhance their use of youth work theories and practices through constructing the discursive resources – or the texts, words, metaphors, and vocabularies workers utilise in articulating, naming and refining their youth work practices. Developing youth workers' discursive resources is pivotal in deepening their knowledge and ability to participate in workplace dialogue and peer learning opportunities.

In researching the nature of organisational change within school systems, Bryk and Schneider (2003) demonstrate the significance of the need for 'relational trust' in fostering change. They note that a lack of 'relational trust' for participants will create significant barriers to such change processes. This notion of 'relational trust' is as important within each learning cluster as the ultimate outcomes of the training program: skills, competence development, an increase in the shared professional identities of youth workers within each region, and an increase in the dimensions of collaboration and cooperation. For such processes to take place, a change in work practices is required. 'Relational trust' does not occur quickly. Its aspects of respect, personal regard, competence in core responsibilities and personal integrity are vital experiences for youth workers in everyday interactions within the workplace (Bryk & Schneider 2003: 42–43). The structured workshops facilitate opportunities for these aspects of 'relational trust' to be experienced.

Work-based learning projects

In drawing upon the aspects of an emergent and negotiated curriculum, youth workers' discursive resources and the notion of relational trust, work-based learning projects are developed and implemented to involve small teams of youth workers in addressing problem-based learning and inquiry-driven processes (Dewey 1997) specific to each site of youth work. These projects range from developing consultative strategies for projects involving young people, to promoting youth participation within local media, and developing and implementing projects to address young peoples' concerns, issues and interests. Attending to these work-based projects requires work in small teams, thus fostering collaboration and team-building in youth centres, and also between and across the participating sites of youth work within each learning cluster. These specific learning projects arise from the structured workshops, participants' voices, educators' observations of skills gaps, and the need to refine and further strengthen youth workers' work practices in addressing the required competencies.

Not only do the work-based learning projects serve to further 'stretch' and translate learnings from structured workshops into workplaces, they also function as mechanisms in which participants generate 'evidence' of their work. This can be used in assessments for verification and confirmation of the required competence and skill levels required for youth workers to gain formal recognition. As Golby and Appleby (1995) discuss, '[t]he use of a critical professional community is widely seen as a vehicle for professional development ... change may be more easily effected when support from a sympathetic group is at hand' (p. 150). Work-based learning projects promote the development of a critical professional community of youth workers who are engaged in the action, reflection and revision of the situated work practices that support the young people with whom they work.

Integrated community events

As Sercombe (2004) notes, youth work can be considered a profession ‘in itself’, but not yet a profession ‘for itself’ (p. 23). Given the complexity across the landscapes of youth work with a variety of work practices and ideologies shaping views on youth work and the non-uniformity of youth work organisations and structures, one singular professional identity of youth work is difficult to establish. On a micro-level, integrated community events are one way to further contribute to professional youth work identities that are ‘for themselves’.

Participating youth workers from each regional cluster are invited to participate in a three-day Youth Work Summit. This Summit is a residential-based event centred on developing skills and exploring work practices the youth workers are utilising within their own sites of youth work. In bringing all participants together, a professional community is established to further youth workers’ opportunities for peer learning (Boud 1999). As Boud and Walker (1998) demonstrate, peer learning doesn’t just occur, rather, much work is involved in building the capacity for such interactions to take place. Given the previous methodological elements, youth workers have had the opportunities to build their discursive resources in order to discuss and articulate their work with others. Experiential learning opportunities from work-based learning projects afford the ability to consider and reflect with peers. Youth workers also need to prepare to engage and collaborate in small teams, and this provides an environment to build the relational trust amongst youth workers within each regional learning cluster. In bringing together youth workers, their confidence to reflect critically on their work with colleagues and peers is enabled.

The Youth Work Summit promotes a sense of shared connection for youth workers. An intended outcome of merging youth work practitioners from across regional South Australia is to provide

an opportunity to experience and cultivate a sense of professional identity amongst one another. This contributes toward building a sense of belonging and connection with other youth workers, when often such a sense of connection and purpose is diminished through the lack of recognition by other working professionals. In contributing to this sense of professional youth work identity, emphasis is placed on strengthening youth workers' 'agentic action' (Billett & Pavlova 2005). This involves engaging youth workers in inquiring into their own subjectivities as youth workers as they present and share their current work and programs with each other, while also providing opportunities for contrast – where youth workers can evaluate their own work practices with those of fellow practitioners. In collaborating, reflecting and working with their peers from across South Australia, youth workers build a stronger sense of purpose in their vocation and establish more robust identities in their profession. Youth workers overcome aspects of isolation and find a sense of belonging and vocational identity amongst a larger community of youth work practitioners, who share common goals and aspirations for their youth work. Through this, youth workers experience and participate within a community of youth workers *in* and *for* the profession of youth work.

Individual assessment interviews

An attention to the personalisation of learning (Järvelä 2006) occurs for each youth worker. This assists in ensuring their successful completion in required learning tasks and assessment processes, and serves as an opportunity for the personal acknowledgement of each youth worker's development and growth through the training program. This role creates an 'outsider witness' (White 1995) process for the adult educator in acknowledging and recognising youth workers' skills development and their emerging vocational narratives. Aspects of their identity construction is noticed and framed by the educator and fed back to the learner. Through this, opportunities are

provided for the youth worker to experiment in shaping new identities about their selves as learners and youth workers (Wojecki 2005).

In these assessment interviews, youth workers draw upon their previous experiences and learnings from other methodological elements within this training program. These personal experiences and knowledge, nested within their own working contexts, provide opportunities to discuss and critique their youth work practices within their assessment interviews. Through this exploration, participants ‘thicken’ their stories and narratives of their youth work; in a sense, ‘telling’ and ‘re-telling’ (Myerhoff 1982) their biographies and development of youth work practices. This provides opportunities for youth workers to ‘re-author’ (White 1995) how their professional identities as youth workers are expanding through their participation in training and professional development.

Emerging professional identities in youth work

Considering a professional identity in youth work, Bessant (2004) notes, ‘[i]n thinking about the future of youth work, it is useful to acknowledge that what is likely to happen is not something that comes about – or something that is shaped by external forces’ (p. 22). Youth work practitioners, policymakers and educators all have agency and a responsibility in shaping the convergence of youth work theories (declarative knowledge) and organisational processes (procedural knowledge) for youth workers. Consequently, a youth work ‘praxis’ (Freire 1970) and ‘youth partnership accountability framework’ (Stacy 2001) that is responsive and attuned to youth workers’ values and belief systems (dispositional knowledge) may be developed. These three realms of a youth worker’s ‘professional knowledge landscape’ (Connelly & Clandinin 1995) contribute to sustaining emergent professional youth work identities.

In this paper, through the perspective of a youth work educator, the notion of ‘how’ vibrant professional identities in youth work might

emerge are explored through the educational methodologies used within a specific VET youth work training program. It is emphasised that attention to workplace learning and situated learning theories might offer pathways to further increase aspects of professional identity through the educational approaches taken.

Conclusion

In the Australian context, there is yet to be a professional body of youth work (Maunder, 1999), identifying the required levels of education for qualification. However, there is ongoing scholarship and debate on what the contributions of such a professional body might offer (Bessant 2004a, 2004b, 2005, Sercombe 2004, YACVIC 2004). Without a professional body anchoring required qualifications for licensing the practice of youth work in Australia, various routes to participating and engaging in youth work training and professional development have emerged. There are not only pathways through higher education, with specific degrees designed in the disciplines of youth studies and youth work (Bowie 2005, Corney 2004a), but also there are competency-based training pathways within the VET sector, as established under the Australian National Training Authority (Bowie 2004).

As the discussion on professional youth work identities continues, it is important to recognise that a central theme emerges: the education, training and development of youth workers. This paper contributes to the conversation of professional youth work identities, by inviting discussion on the design of relevant educational methodologies and approaches for engaging Australian youth workers through competency-based training programs. Often when youth work education is discussed, the emphasis is on *'what'* the youth work curricula should consist of – the required theoretical knowledge, values, skills and attributes linked to desired qualifications. These required competencies are all embodied in VET through the

development of compulsory and elective competencies. The focus in this paper, however, is on *'how'* a VET youth work curriculum might be envisioned and delivered – the particular educational strategies, intentions and actions taken to engage youth workers in a meaningful, relevant and situated learning program which prepares them to be competent, well-versed and effective within their own individual sites of youth work. This view is made possible by drawing upon theories of workplace learning, and how these perspectives help to understand that sites of youth work are sites of learning. From this standpoint, youth work education is conceptualised to strengthen youth workers' sense of connection, belonging and vocational identity within a community of youth work practitioners.

In shifting the focus from the *'what'* to the *'how'* of youth work education, a particular training and development program for South Australian youth workers has been explored. In shifting to *'how'* youth work education might occur, policymakers, practitioners and adult educators alike share common end goals: a vibrant workforce of 'articulate practitioners' (Phelan 2005) who understand their youth work practices to be a 'craft' (Eiskovits & Beker 1983) that can be used for engaging with young people, and contributing to their personal development and fulfilment as healthy and active citizens within their communities, and larger society as a whole.

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About the author

Dr Andrew Wojecki is a Senior Project Officer in the Australian Institute of Social Relations at Relationships Australia (SA) where he delivers workforce development and organisational learning initiatives. He is also an Adjunct Lecturer in the Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work, within the School of Education, University of South Australia.

Current contact details

18 Harbor Cove Drive, The Woodlands, Texas, USA 77381